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Creating A Subject Authority File for Manuscript Holdings

Elizabeth W. Knowlton

Establishing effective subject access to research materials is a continuing problem for both librarians and archivists. The librarian is in a better position because he or she has the author and title to catalog by, as well as the use of established subject authority files or lists such as those developed by the Library of Congress. These lists of subject headings which are recognized and followed by all professional librarians eliminate the use of non-standard terms for cataloging and greatly facilitate access to collections lacking descriptive titles.

The archivist has a more difficult situation for two reasons. The first relates to the nature of the archival materials themselves, as opposed to books and periodicals; and the second is due to a lack of subject authority lists in the archival field. Published materials are written for particular purposes, enabling the librarians to utilize the title, the table of contents, the index, and, occasionally, predetermined topic headings to provide subject access. Collections of manuscripts, however, come together much more accidentally, with little forethought about researchers, and may provide no inherent subject clues for users. Donor or author/creator headings often do little to illuminate collection contents since many bodies of manuscripts consist of documents collected, rather than written, by their donor/creators. This situation is aggravated by the fact that, unlike libraries, the archival field has no recognized subject authority list for use with manuscript materials and is not likely to have such a tool in the near future. Clearly these problems only intensify the need for practicing archivists to create a specific and precise subject access file for use with their own manuscript collections.

Although the situation differs from archive to archive, the germ of a subject authority list is generally present. Archivists arranging and describing manuscript materials will be familiar with the subject content of the collections they process. The reference area may have files of material arranged by topics developed from frequently or infrequently asked research questions. Staff catalogers may have attempted to adapt library subject headings for manuscript applications. All or any one of these can be the basis for the development of an integrated, comprehensive file which will insure standardized cataloging of materials by subject. A timely beginning to this task is essential. Each week the number of collections increases and all too often these are accessible to the researcher only so long as collective staff memory of them prevails.

The purpose of this article is to provide the reader with guidance towards the creation of a comprehensive list which will provide standardized terms for detailed subject cataloging, along with appropriate cross-references (including

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Figure 1

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those which should not be used), to direct the researcher to those materials relevant to his or her project. Ideally this list can be used throughout an institution and cover a variety of forms such as letters, business records, genealogical files, printed material, graphics, and perhaps even artifacts. No matter what final form the list takes, initially a flexible format is best. A card file approach will allow for essential organic expansion and change without altering the basic structure of the list.

There are three main resources for creating a Subject Authority File:

(1) the scholars and writers who have produced books in the area of collection; (2) staff members who have experience in processing collections and referencing them for researchers; and (3) local and regional subject authority lists already in existence.

The first step is to go to the authorities. Although general librarians have the Library of Congress to depend upon, librarians in special libraries often have to create particular subject categories for the special kinds of information in their institutions. But even special libraries have holdings duplicated in other libraries and can use subject authority lists developed elsewhere. Lists are created by studying the indexes of the libraries' holdings, the best books in the specialized collection area, and extracting the terms which appear most frequently. These subjects will be the most useful in cataloging all of the books and periodicals.

But an archive's or historical society's manuscripts collection is unique. Most of the documents are found in no other collection and are not indexed. The primary source as an authority does not seem useful in subject cataloging manuscripts. Therefore, the creator of the subject authority file must turn to secondary sources, the books written about the periods and places covered in your collection. For instance, in the Georgia Department of Archives and History, general histories of Georgia can be consulted. E. Merton Coulter's well-known work, A Short History of Georgia, has a lengthy index. Reproduced in (figure 1) is page 445 of Coulter with nouns useful for a subject authority list underlined: Liberty pole, erection in Savannah; Library commission, state; Livestock; Local option; Lotteries; Loyalists, see Tories; Lumber, production of; and Lynching. To create a list from the indexes of ten or so books, the compiler simply makes a card for each of these terms and writes the author's name on it. The same procedure is followed with other reference works. Thus, if the second book were by Jane Smith and it also indexed the term Lotteries, a card would be headed Lotteries with the names Coulter and Smith listed underneath.

In general, it is best to examine at least eight to twelve books on the subject and to reject as a term any that does not appear in 80-90% of the indexes as not common enough to be useful. So, for example, if Liberty Pole appeared only in Coulter, it would not be accepted as a term. If Lynching were found in eight of the ten books used, it would appear in the completed subject file. The term Loyalists has remained in Georgia's file because more sources used it than its synonym Tories.

However, this method alone is never going to supply all of the terms needed for subject cataloging a manuscripts collection using only history indexes because those sources do not generally deal with the problems and pleasures of daily life which are found so frequently in the manuscripts of private letters. Terms outside the general categories of public life--

PRELIMINARY CATALOGING SHEET

Peter E. Schinkel
Manuscripts

Georgia Department of Archives and History

Figure 2

CONTROL #: 78-493 LOCATION #: 2122-1261. TITLE: NOBLE JOHN BROOKS OUTGOING LETTER AND DIARY2. AUTHOR(S): N.J. BROOKS (1836-1922)3. PHYSICAL FORM(S), TYPE(S), VOLUME: 10 letters, 2 diaries, original loose papers, 16 pieces; typed transcripts, 1 piece; photocopied transcripts, 11 pieces TOTAL VOLUME: 1 folder4. DATE SPAN: 1862-18645. GEOGRAPHIC AREA: Bartow Co., GA; S.C.; VA.6. SUBJECT(S): Civil War - letters Battle of Cold Harbor (VA)Civil War - DiariesCivil War Regiments -Cold's Legion.7. FINDING AIDS: inventory in case file8. RESTRICTIONS: none9. DONOR: Armaretta Brooks Matthews (daughter)10. ABSTRACT: The letters are written to Wm. C. and Mary Timmons BROOKS, N.J.'s parents. The diary covers only Mar-Sept 1864. Both give detailed accounts of ^{the} CW soldier's daily life. Brooks (his spelling) was well read and philosophic on the futility of war. The longest letter, July 4, 1862, gives minute details of the Battle of Cold Harbor.See also Brooks Family Papers, Family Name File, and Prints (BRT 013-114) Vanishing GA.Date: 1/26/79 Prepared by: Euk

those being politics, labor, education, etc.--are not found in the average history. Terms relating to childbearing, courtship, and death are all subjects more likely to appear in general works on social customs and beliefs, and these books also must be consulted in order to generate the specific nouns necessary for the subject authority file.

Even these general works may not produce every term useful for defining a collection. Therefore, a second authority is needed. Fortunately, it is close at hand--colleagues and other staff members. A preliminary cataloging sheet (figure 2), derived from an actual collection, shows four subject headings (see #6) chosen by someone familiar with the manuscripts. Sheets like this can be kept for a period of six to twelve months by several of the staff experienced in working with the particular documents of the archive. This process creates a pool of terms by persons knowledgeable in specific areas, a pool much larger and more comprehensive than if it were developed by a single cataloger. After a large number of sheets are collected, a card can be made for each term, indicating the number of times it has been used by each processor. Continue as with the index compilations. Thus, for example, there may be a card for Rivers followed by the names of people who have selected the term and the number of times each did so: Jones - 2; Johnson - 1; Brown - 2.

Any earlier attempts to create a subject list can be used to produce the finished product. Check to see how the various lists overlap; terms which appear on most of them can be transferred to the composite file. Although the subject authority file does not generally incorporate the forms of the manuscripts, exceptions can be made based on reference experience. The Georgia Department of Archives and History Manuscripts Section, for instance, uses the term Personal Narratives to include diaries, journals, and narratives because there are specific requests for such items.

Additional Sources For Creating The Subject Authority File

The third group of sources for terms are the subject authority lists developed and/or used in local and regional archives and libraries. The closest, probably the one used by the research library of the Manuscripts Section's own institution, may not be very useful because it is used in cataloging books. It may be very similar to the Library of Congress subject headings. However, the local list may be helpful in choosing between two or more possible terms. A concern for the nearby authority files makes the resultant manuscripts cataloging compatible with what is done in the research library and thus renders the referencing of all materials easier.

Professionally developed subject authority lists from geographically and historically similar archives are an even better source. The Georgia Department of Archives and History's Manuscript Section uses The South Carolina Archives' Topical Index List extensively. Completed several years ago, the South Carolina List contained many terms which appeared already on Georgia's developing list (which was reassuring in itself); it also included other terms, not yet thought of, which seemed applicable to Georgia manuscripts. Such a list from a neighboring area with similar climate, geography, and history can be invaluable. The term Artisans and Mechanics, to incorporate various craftpersons in a wide variety of fields ranging from potters and weavers to the individual builders of machinery, came from the South Carolina List. Figure 3 shows samples of subject heading cards that include terms gleaned from books, manuscript processors, and lists from other institutions.

Figure 3

LOYALISTS

Mary Lane's list - Loyalists, American
Jim Smith's list - Loyalists
Coulter - see TORIES
S.C.'s list - LOYALISTS

LUMBER INDUSTRY

Mary Lane's list - see BUSINESS & TRADE
Jim Smith's list - see TIMBER
Coulter - LUMBER, PRODUCTION of
S.C.'s list - does not appear

LYNCHING

Mary Lane's list - LYNCHING
Jim Smith's list - see AFRO-AMERICANS -
LYNCHING
Coulter - LYNCHING
S.C.'s list - does not appear

Do not neglect the great national compendium, the National Union Catalog of Manuscripts' Collections (NUCMC) index, for specific terms which may not be found anywhere else. These can be modified as needed. Although the list in its entirety is too detailed and overwhelming for use in most smaller manuscripts collections, it can suggest solutions to many problems. Their term Cities and Towns proved a useful way to cover a wide variety of advertisements and postcards about Georgia's towns after changing the phrase to Towns and Cities to better reflect the size of the communities. The NUCMC Index is primarily helpful as a source of ideas.

Specific Ways to Handle Details

Adding terms to the file does not solve all the problems of subject cataloging; a list of possible subdivisions must be drawn up. In this way, the forms of the manuscripts can be dealt with--Newspapers and Graphics, for instance. Broad categories like Civil War can be broken down into Civil War - Letters or Civil War - Regiments. Subdivisions can be applied to any common geographic location.

The mention of geographic location leads to the subject of proper nouns. Generally a subject authority list will not include proper nouns because they are too numerous. This does not mean, however, that they are not used in cataloging. Many proper nouns become headings because they are main entries: The William K. Haddaway Civil War Letters; the Morecock/Baldy/Smith/Williams Family Papers; the Jackson Sisters Papers. Haddaway, Morecock, and Jackson are automatically headings in the card catalog. Additional subject cards would be made for Baldy Family, Smith Family, and Williams Family. If one collection contained letters written by Eugene Talmadge, for instance, a subject card would be made for him. These matters lie outside the scope of the Subject Authority File and must be decided by experience and good judgment.

Although geographic locations will not appear in the subject file, some limits must be set to prevent every Hilly Dale and Handy Crossroads from being considered a subject. At the State Archives collections are cataloged by county because: 1) so much of Georgia is organized under the county structure; 2) there is little urban development state-wide; and 3) the numerous small counties make location very specific. Georgia locations are under county name only with cross-referencing for county name changes. Collections with papers from outside the state are cataloged by State or foreign country. The one exception concerns Civil War soldiers. Because soldiers were moved so often, material authored by them is cataloged under Civil War Regiments, followed by the appropriate regimental number. The location of these regiments on various dates is easily identified in numerous histories.

Another consideration is chronological cataloging. Time periods can be included in the subject file that are keyed to the amount of material in each era that the collection contains. If eighteenth-century material is rare, begin with the category 1800. If there is a great deal of World War I material, make 1914-1918 a whole section in itself.

GEORGIA DEPARTMENT OF ARCHIVES
AND HISTORY - Manuscripts Section

3/15/79: ewk

Figure 4

SUBJECT HEADING LIST - page 6

LAW	see also: PROHIBITION
LAW ENFORCEMENT	see also: COURTS; LIQUOR LAWS xx CRIME; CRIMINALS
Law Practice	see: BUSINESS AND TRADE - LEGAL PRACTICE
Lawyers	see: BUSINESS AND TRADE - LEGAL PRACTICE
Legal Societies	see: BUSINESS AND TRADE - ORGANIZATIONS
LIBRARIES	see also: specific libraries xx EDUCATION
LIQUOR LAWS	xx LAW ENFORCEMENT; PROHIBITION; TEMPERANCE
LIVESTOCK	xx AGRICULTURE
Lodges	see: CLUBS, SOCIETIES, AND LODGES
Lunatic Asylums	see: MENTAL HOSPITALS
LOYALISTS	x Tories xx AMERICAN REVOLUTION
Lumber Industry	see: BUSINESS AND TRADE; TIMBER
LYNCHING	xx AFRO-AMERICANS
MAPS	see also: SURVEYOR GENERAL DEPT. (GA)
Masons [secret order]	see: FREEMASONRY
Mechanics	see: ARTISANS AND MECHANICS
Medical Colleges	see: COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES
Medical Practice	see: BUSINESS AND TRADE - MEDICAL PRACTICE
MEDICAL SERVICES	see also: HOSPITALS xx EPIDEMICS; MENTAL ILLNESS
MEDICINE	see also: PHYSICIANS AND SURGEONS x Home Remedies xx EPIDEMICS; PHYSICIANS & SURGEONS; SCIENCE
MENTAL HOSPITALS	see also: specific mental institutions x Lunatic Asylums xx HOSPITALS; MENTAL ILLNESS
MENTAL ILLNESS	see also: MEDICAL SERVICES; MENTAL HOSPITALS
MILITIA	see also: specific units of specific wars xx AMERICAN REVOLUTION
Mills	see: TEXTILE MILLS

Organizing A List

Once the list is compiled, it must be organized. Two options are: (1) the traditional subject authority listing, similar in format to the Library of Congress Subject Headings; and (2) a thesaurus capable of being used with on-line cataloging. Since most archives and historical societies do not yet have on-line cataloging and because organizing a thesaurus is more exacting than organizing the traditional list, only the latter will be described.

The traditional method is easier because subjects can be selected in isolation from each other and only related to other terms as necessary. In reviewing page six of the Georgia Department of Archives and History Manuscripts Section's Subject Authority List (figure 4), it is easy to trace which terms made it from the Coulter index page to the final listing. Some were too narrow to warrant inclusion. Some which also appeared in the South Carolina list were added automatically. The terms that were adopted appear in capital letters in the left-hand column. Terms that were in use by catalogers but were omitted from the file appear in small type. "See" references guide the user to the correct term: Lumber Industry, "See Business and Trade or Timber."

A system of "X's" help the compiler prepare cross-reference cards. If she or he chooses Mental Hospitals as a term, the "X Lunatic Asylums" indicates that a card must be made for the latter term with a "see" reference to Mental Hospitals. In addition, cards must be made for Hospitals and for Mental Illness, each with a "see also" reference to Mental Hospitals, thus channeling the researcher toward more specific subjects.

The Subject Authority File continues to grow with the experience of the processors and the reference staff. The term Lynching has been added rather than the subject being subsumed under the category Afro-Americans. There is a "see also" reference from the latter to the former. The unused term "Mills," with a "see" reference to Textile Mills, has also appeared.

Once the list is completed, its uses are fairly standard. Checks are made next to terms when they are first used to give some indication as to which terms are deadwood. Additional cards are made for "see" and "see also" references, and further subdivisions are added when topics seem to be too broad. The subject authority list exists to make subject cataloging useful to researchers. If a term is used often enough that hundreds of cards are found under it, subject cataloging is not useful. There is no point to using the term Georgia as a geographical term in the Georgia Archives Manuscripts Section. Indeed, no archivist has the time, nor is it very helpful, to catalog a collection under every noun which appears in its papers. Keep in mind that some subject cataloging is better than none and that the sooner such a reference aid can be made available to researchers the better.

In Summary

The Subject Authority File forms the necessary basis for ready access to manuscripts collections by providing precise cross-referencing of the many possible terms which could be used in subject cataloging. Such a list has its roots in the work and thought of the people who process and reference the manuscripts. As well as collecting terms, compilers of Subject Heading Lists need to develop subdivisions and guidelines concerning special areas

such as geographical and chronological terms. Finally, the file must be organized with "see" and "see also" references to make it useable by catalogers.

If the Subject Headings remain on cards, additions and corrections can easily be made, but the entire file cannot be seen at one time. In list form, the terms are easy for the cataloger to skim; however, changes to the list are messy and it has to be retyped completely when revised. On the other hand, the list can be duplicated and passed around easily, whereas cards are bulky to transport. Each form has its advantages depending on the point one has reached in the evolution of the authority file.